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SUBJECT: VARIED REACTIONS FROM RUSSIANS AND AMERICANS AT  
YEKATERINBURG'S INAUGURATION CELEBRATION

¶1. As the world watched the inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, the Consulate General in Yekaterinburg provided nearly 70 witnesses to the moving event. Among the guests were Russian political analysts, local government officials, high school students, FLEX alumni, university students, eight media outlets, and more than twenty American citizens who emerged from the woodwork at the last minute asking to participate. Staff observed a discernible difference in the reactions between the older Russian guests and those of the younger Russian students and Americans present. Surprise was also expressed by several Russian staff members at some of the details of the Inauguration, such as the prayers and the musical performances on the Capitol steps. The Russian students and American citizens expressed excitement and jubilation at several points during the ceremony.

¶2. The reception rooms at the Consulate normally accommodate a maximum of 50 guests at official functions. The original guest list for the reception counted 45 Russians, including ten political contacts, media representatives from two internet portals, two print newspapers, and five TV channels. The gathering was billed as an "informal reception" in Russian and as an "inauguration party" in English. A few days before the Inauguration American citizens resident in Yekaterinburg began calling the Consulate requesting the opportunity to see the live feed of the ceremony. By the time of the event, twenty-four additional names had been added to the guest list. The final count at the event was estimated at 69 participants. Despite the tight space, compounded by the roaming TV cameras, an air of excited expectation buzzed through the crowd.

¶3. Framed by the American and Russian flags, the CG gave a welcoming introduction in Russian followed by a brief biography of President Obama. The PAO, dressed in patriotic colors, presented a Power Point overview of the schedule of Inauguration events from the Whistle Stop Train to the National Prayer Service. The 40 CDs that PAS had burned with President Obama's bio in Russian and English, the e-Journal on "U.S. Presidential Transitions" (in English), and the Russian version of America.gov's "New Administration" pages, were all taken by the end of the evening, with orders for more fulfilled the following day.

¶4. Post placed two TV monitors in adjoining rooms tuned to a CNN Live broadcast. In the main room a simultaneous translator, sitting next to a large screen monitor with the English sound turned down, provided high-quality continuous Russian translation of the Inauguration ceremony. By the time the Inauguration ceremony began at 10:00 PM local time, about two-thirds of the audience was concentrated around the English-language monitor, while a third was gathered around the monitor with the Russian translation. By that time most of the senior Russian political analysts had left, many expressing surprise at the size of the crowd both in Washington DC and the Consulate. There was also a sense that some of the professionals were uncomfortable with the students' obvious enthusiasm over the celebratory atmosphere in the United States.

¶5. The owner of a local radio station revealed in a conversation that, in his opinion, President Obama was still a "dark horse"

with an unpredictable future. He admitted that Obama had surrounded himself with a strong team of experienced advisers who he hoped would not let Obama down in his role as the "President of Change". Another academic expressed the view that Russia ranked low in US priorities, while he thought many in Russia believed that it should be America's number one priority.

¶6. Some guests reported surprise that the transfer of power in the United States could be such a joyful occasion, at times sounding almost envious. One FSN was surprised that the Inauguration included prayer, believing that the United States had separated church from state. Everyone agreed that the smooth, peaceful transfer of power in the United States was exemplary, admitting that this particular Inauguration seemed to be special, even extraordinary.

¶7. A dynamic which contributed to the extra sense of excitement was the meeting of Americans resident in Yekaterinburg and the mainly young Russian students. As ordinary Russians rubbed shoulders with ordinary Americans, they found much in common through the celebration of democratic values and the peaceful transfer of power. The mix of Americans and Russians captured the spirit of citizen diplomacy.

¶8. Despite the overflow crowd and the mixed note sounded by the Russian political analysts, the evening was a resounding success. The media gave extensive coverage to the event, with interviews of the CG, American citizens and local Russians appearing in both TV and print outlets. The Russian teacher accompanying her high school students reported that they were absolutely ecstatic over the opportunity to attend the Inauguration and that this event would remain one of the most memorable in their lives. The Americans resident in Yekaterinburg were extremely grateful for an opportunity to share this event together in their Consulate. Post is also grateful to IIP for providing excellent "Transition" materials.

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